
**MORE QUARRIES FROM
LAST CHANCE GULCH**

Railroad Days

Iron Horse steams into town; impact is unimaginable

As the Northern Pacific Railroad pushed westward across Montana on its journey to the coast, Helena jubilantly prepared to greet its long-awaited arrival in the Prickly Pear Valley. On June 12, 1883, the eve of this great event, a reporter for the *Daily Herald* wrote that the railroad meant “virtual annexation to the United States.” A traveler would be able to go from Helena to New York City and back again in ten days, before his neighbors noticed his absence. At a time when autumn travel between Fort Benton and Sioux City could take a full month, the impact of this event was almost unimaginable. The reporter sums up the general sentiment: “We all long for statehood, but of the two, rail connection is the greatest blessing.”

The site selected for the Northern Pacific depot was then a mile and a half out of town. Helena

Avenue, beginning at the upper end of Main Street, had been surveyed and graded in preparation; it was a straight shot from the depot to town. The railroad began to sell its unused lots and the list of early owners reads like a page out of a Helena Who's Who: Colonel Charles Broadwater, Christmas Gift Evans, Lewis Reeder, A. M. Holter, Richard Lockey, C. W. Cannon and others. In January of 1884, the *Helena Weekly Herald* reported that a great deal of capital had been expended in the Northern Pacific Addition. Theodore Welcome's Elite Saloon and barber shop was one of the first brick buildings, constructed for \$3,000. Alexander H. Beattie's \$3,000 Grand Pacific Hotel and John Lamy's \$6,000 Denver Hotel stood across from each other at the end of Sanders Street. A few doors down the public house with a backyard well was no doubt a great convenience.

The next year the *Helena Independent* proudly listed the development that had occurred in 1884. Depot area expenditures included a \$35,000 flour mill, a \$20,000 plant for Helena Gas Works, a \$20,000 railroad refrigerator and numerous dwellings. One of these was built by George S. Appleton, who was to become one of Helena's premier architects.

By 1887, two years prior to Montana's statehood, Helenans spoke of “before the railroad” and “after the railroad” much as Southerners spoke of “before” and “after” the Civil War. The street car had replaced the six-horse stage coach, and the huge



Taken in December, 1885. The original depot building with the Grand Pacific Hotel to its immediate left. (Haynes Foundation Collection, Montana Historical Society)

freight wagons newly arrived from distant places like Fort Benton no longer spread over the plain outside town at dusk. The Northwest Magazine reported in September of that year: "A populous suburb has sprung up around the Northern Pacific station." An Eastern visitor arriving at the depot would find "long lines of freight cars, the array of hacks and hotel omnibuses..." and "a brightly-painted street car" that would take the visitor "up town" for ten cents. Those just passing through could choose from five hotels or spend their money at numerous saloons within a few steps of the depot. "Old croakers" who objected to the railroad's progress could look back with affection on the old days of gold mining in the gulch, but that era was over. Helena now thrived on the industry and growth precipitated by the advent of the "iron horse."

The silver panic of 1893 put a damper on construction, but a decade later the Northern Pacific made plans to build a new depot. In a letter to railroad president C. S. Mellen, investor/speculator Richard Locky recommended that the new depot be located "where the old one was, and that the most attractive view for travellers will be from that point." Locky predicted that, with its proximity to the new State Capitol building, "Helena Avenue will yet become the principal thoroughfare of the town." By 1904 Helena indeed boasted a beautiful new depot, designed by Charles A. Reed. (It was the firm of Reed and Stem, in association with the firm of Warren and Wetmore, that designed and built New York's famed Grand Central Station.)

The depot area didn't quite live up to Locky's prediction, but even so, it continued to grow. In 1905, there were enough Catholic residents in the

Sixth Ward and the Helena Valley combined to warrant establishing a new Catholic parish. St. Mary's Parish was founded, and its own priest appointed in 1908. St. Mary's Church and School at 1425 North Roberts was built in 1910 and its rectory in 1922.

But by 1929 the north side of the 1400 block of Helena Avenue had become dilapidated and unsightly as its long-time residents grew older and business dwindled. In fact, J. Einar Larson recalls how it was said that Helena's was the worst-looking depot area on the entire Northern Pacific line and a far cry from promoting a good first impression for travelers. Larson's father, a long-time area businessman, rallied other area property owners and approached the city. It so happened that a trust had been established by the deceased sisters of Alexander, George and Edward Beattie, also long deceased. The three brothers had settled in Helena in the 1860s and became prominent investors and businessmen. With the \$16,124 trust, the city bought block 26. Among the sellers were some of the original old-timers including Theodore Welcome's widow Mary. Beattie Memorial Park was thus created as a "beauty spot" for the enjoyment of Sixth Ward residents and to give newcomers a favorable first impression.

The 1935 earthquakes victimized some of the older depot area buildings like the Drake Hotel, formerly the Grand Pacific, which lost its upper stories. The old Capital Hotel at 1519 Railroad Avenue collapsed. St. Mary's brick veneered walls were severely damaged, then repaired and stuccoed. Despite time and Mother Nature, the Denver Hotel survives as a pawn shop and the depot serves as Montana Rail Link offices. St. Mary's is once again a church. Beattie Memorial Park no longer greets travelers, but continues to be a pleasant place for residents and a logical extension of the depot.

Railroad Avenue endures as Helena's last remaining brick street. These and a few other treasures that comprise the depot district are currently being evaluated for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. Together they tell the story of the coming of the railroad to the Prickly Pear Valley and what it meant to Helena.



Theodore Welcome's brick building that once stood at the eastern end of what is now Beattie Park. (J Einar Larson Collection, Montana Historical Society)

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